

FAILURE TO LAUNCH?

By Deborah Lane, LCSW, Clinical Therapist

Brian Richards, a 22-year-old male, presented at the office of his Primary Care Physician. Dr. Greene has cared for Brian and his family over the past 15 years. Brian had been complaining of episodes of shortness of breath and pain in his chest. His labs and physical exam were unremarkable. Dr. Greene wanted to rule out Anxiety and Depression and referred Brian to a clinical therapist.

The assessment summary stated remarkable psychosocial stressors related to his significant challenges of transitioning into adulthood. Brian has been living with his parents since he withdrew from Texas State University in San Marcos during his first semester. Although he was on the honor roll in high school, he was failing all his first semester classes. Brian was experiencing severe emotional difficulties, including self-harmful behavior, not attending classes and had isolated himself from other students. After he moved home, he attempted to attend the local university. However, he was not successful. He enrolled and dropped out of his community college 3 times over the past 2 years. Brian has tried working minimum wage jobs and has been fired from 3 jobs within a 6-month period. Brian has given up. Society now has a name (although derogatory in nature) known as “Failure to Launch”.



WHAT IS FAILURE TO LAUNCH?

“Failure to Launch” is a syndrome which describes young adults like Brian who have not been successful in transitioning into adulthood. We are seeing an alarming number of young adults who have significant difficulties since graduating from high school. Often, they have undiagnosed or misdiagnosed psychiatric disorders which result in inability to be successful in school and maintaining a job. Their symptoms interfere with their success, leaving them with extreme feelings of frustration and identifying themselves as failures.

FAILURE TO DIAGNOSE?

Young adults who are predisposed to having a mental health disorder often present with symptoms after graduating from high school. The young adults are overwhelmed with lack of structure, too many choices and stressors from society. The lack of structure and loss of “safety” (knowing what tomorrow will bring) often results in the presentation of the disorders. It is devastating for the young adult who is continuing to struggle to find independence. They often feel shame, isolation, and loneliness.

These young adults feel rejected because they can't meet their family's and society's expectations. They develop poor self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, sadness, and a strong sense of failure. One young adult said to me, “I feel like I am constantly letting my parents down and that I am a burden to them. I really feel horrible about myself and I think I will be stuck like this forever. I just can't believe this is my life.”

They watch their peers graduate and start their careers while they feel ashamed of themselves for their lack of achievement. Eli Le-

bowitz, PhD from the Yale Child Study Center states, “They frequently suffer shame and alienation as same-aged peers accumulate accomplishments while they accrue increasing disability.”

The “failure to launch” syndrome also effects the relationship between the adult child and their parents. It is very challenging for parents as they often do not understand or validate mental health disorders and the need for treatment. One of my young female patients told me, “I am so tired of hearing my parents say that they do not understand how I can be so lazy and unmotivated to get a job or go to school. They just don't understand how difficult it is for me and how everyday I feel worse about myself.”

HOW CAN WE HELP?

Often a young adult's physician is the first line of defense. Specifically, Primary Care Physicians and Gynecologists have developed a bond with the family and young adult through years of treatment. It is important to be extremely cognizant of symptoms of depression and anxiety when treating these young adults. Continue to ask questions regarding their education, employment, and daily routines. It is important to be proactive in referring these patients for treatment. Often, there is a great relief for them and their families when they are informed by a mental health professional that there is an actual diagnosis that is treatable.

AN ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS

There is a significant opportunity for successful treatment. The psychiatrist will do a thorough psychiatric evaluation of the patient which will often result in the diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder such as untreated ADHD, depression, anxiety (specifically social anxiety), bipolar disorder and/or other mood related disorders.

FINDING THE “LAUNCH” IN TREATMENT

In addition to medication management, counseling is vital and a necessary component to treatment. Individual therapy with a Licensed Clinical Social Worker provides a safe platform. It is here where the patient utilizes their own strengths, developing tools and strategies to achieve the successful “launch” into adulthood. Family therapy is also necessary for the parents to learn the parenting skills specifically designed to help support and empower their young adult child.

Group therapy is a highly effective modality of treatment. A young adult group, led by an experienced clinical therapist, can address the patient's feelings of isolation and rejection in society. It allows the young adult to feel support from other group members and develop appropriate therapeutic skills. It is also an excellent vehicle to reduce social anxiety through practicing social interactions.

Accurate diagnosis and treatment can create needed accomplishments for our young adults. They develop positive feelings towards themselves as they transition into adulthood and begin their contribution to society.

Deborah Levi Lane, LCSW is a clinical therapist in private practice in San Antonio. She provides individual and group psychotherapy to children, adolescents, and adults, specializing in the treatment of patients with bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders.